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Theatre Critics' Reviews
1944

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Burns Mantle's selections for the forthcoming 1943-44 issue of "The Best Plays of 1943-44 and the Year Book of the Drama in America," include the following six serious dramas:

"Winged Victory," by Moss Hart
"The Searching Wind," by Lillian Hellman
"Decision," by Edward Chodorov
"Outrageous Fortune," by Rose Franken
"Storm Operation," by Maxwell Anderson
"Pick-up Girl," by Elsa Shelley

And the following four comedies:

"The Voice of the Turtle," by John Van Druten
"Over 21," by Ruth Gordon
"Jacobowsky and the Colonel," by S. N. Behrman and Franz Werfel
"The Innocent Voyage," by Paul Osborn and Richard Hughes

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"That Old Devil"

Comedy by J. C. Nugent; staged by Mr. Nugent; setting by Paul Morrison. Presented by Lodewick Vroom at the Playhouse Theater, June 5, 1944.

THE CAST

Hester	Ruth Gilbert
Officer Williamson	David S. Jordan
John Woodruff	Matt Briggs
Jim Blair	J. C. Nugent
Doctor Davis	Matthew Smith
Harry Robinson	Warren Lyons
Wilbur Blime	J. Colvil Dunn
Lila Merrill	Agnes Doyle
Martha Blair	Luella Gear
Mrs. Woodruff	Ruth Gates
Mrs. Blime	Lou McGuire
Mrs. Robinson	Mary Dickson
Jerry Swift	Michael Ames

NEW YORK POST
June 6, 1944

J. C. Nugent, Actor, Deserves Better Playwright Than J. C. Nugent

By WILELLA WALDORF

J. C. NUGENT, a roly-poly gentleman who can be droll on occasion, and is a loyal devotee of the petulant pout, has written himself a comedy entitled "That Old Devil" which was duly revealed last night at the Playhouse.

In it Mr. Nugent pictures himself as a retired citizen of a dismal community known as Beechville, Conn. Everybody, including his wife, takes him pretty much for granted as a harmless old fuddy-duddy.

Consequently when the English girl refugee who happens to be visiting around discovers that she is going to have a baby, and it is suggested that he may be the guilty father, the old devil encourages the notion.

All of the neighborhood wives—a more depressing parcel of females you never encountered—immediately begin to cultivate the old devil, and the last we recall of the matter Luella Gear, who played his wife, was either sobbing or pretending to sob in a fine frenzy of theatrical agony.

Seems a Bit Rickety

A short time later there we were on the way home aboard the bus, which is too bad, really, for we have seen many worse comedies than "That Old Devil" (list of titles mailed on receipt of stamped addressed envelope and money order for $40,000).

Mr. Nugent really is a rather droll fellow every now and then and could probably have had us guffawing in a better vehicle. This little item knocked together by himself seems a bit rickety even for Broadway in the summer of '44.

No doubt it should be added that a number of synthetic old sinners in our vicinity appeared to be enjoying all the talk about virility and roughage. Personally we spent the second act wondering what had become of Luella Gear. She was off stage so long that we began to wonder if she hadn't absent-mindedly gone home.

The moral tone of Mr. Nugent's little comedy is low. The real father of the English refugee's unborn child was a young man who threw eggs at political meetings and was trying to get into the Air Force. He didn't get his commission until somebody discovered that he was color blind. This was the reason the refugee couldn't tell anybody who the father was, making it necessary for Mr. Nugent to pretend. . . .

Oh, come now. There's a paper shortage, isn't there?

NEW YORK TIMES
June 6, 1944

Nugent Bedeviled

By LEWIS NICHOLS

THERE is little doubt that, duly cloaked in baggy clothes and charm, J. C. Nugent is one of the great men of the theatre. Baffled, bewildered, blowing through crises like a porpoise, he has a wonderful manner—as well as all the tricks of vaudeville, which are, after all, the essential tricks of the theatre. But every now and then even a great man stumbles, and this Mr. Nugent has done in "That Old Devil," which he wrote and in which he appeared last evening at the Playhouse. As an author he has not done the actor justice, and such wayward behavior is a serious matter for an early-June evening.

* * *

The Nugent pen this time is scratchy and a little wavering, as though its owner were turning to the makeshift drama without much interest. "That Old Devil" deals with the question of babies, which have been born so profusely on the stage these last few months, and its author is regrettably pretty tiresome on the subject. The joke of an elderly man taking the blame for a potential increase in the race grows somewhat thin, and it may even be that it grows somewhat tasteless before the evening is over. The actor Nugent tries to rescue it by full use of all weapons, talents, holds and grips, but it is a little too much for him. Set down "That Old Devil" as a disappointing three acts in the theatre.

Mr. Nugent's people are a retired business man and his wife, some of their friends and an English girl seeking refuge from the war. All the wives, lacking children, play cards, and it is the girl who announces that she is to have a child. The business man gets blamed for collaboration, and being that old devil, the charge pleases him. Mr. Nugent's imagination did not go beyond the fact that all the devil's wife's friends start to pursue him, and that the girl had been married right along to a nice young man seeking to join the Air Forces. An audience is left with the grim feeling that it has seen "That Old Devil" before, seen it perhaps too often.

* * *

Of the merits of J. C. Nugent, the actor, there has been no dispute for a century or more. Before that old devil grows tiresome through desperate repetition of a standard joke, Mr. Nugent goes through all his most affable tricks. He is vague, forgetful, the cares of the world press him firmly in the chair as he faces one terrible disaster after another. The fact that he is wasting all that talent in the present case also is a disaster. Luella Gear, who is no mean comedienne herself, hasn't a great deal to do as the wife, and there are parts played by Matt Briggs, Ruth Gilbert, J. Colvil Dunn, Ruth Gates, Agnes Doyle and others. Being a triple-threat man of the theatre, Mr. Nugent also directed, not in an outstanding fashion. "That Old Devil" has the master hanging to the ropes.

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM
June 6, 1944

Another Piece of Baby Talk

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

I GUESS there's just no way of keeping the stork off Broadway. In the interests of farce, it has been swooping down with dismaying regularity for the past 18 months or so; and down it swooped again Monday night. In *That Old Devil* J. C. Nugent seems to have discovered one last, desperate obstetrical wrinkle—or perhaps that is being too hopeful. At any rate, he has stirred up a great deal of commotion by making an elderly gentleman the center of his jest. Jests about old men achieving fatherhood—and unsanctified fatherhood at that—are seldom overpoweringly mirthful; and even with Mr. Nugent bringing his own attractive personality to the old codger's role, *That Old Devil* is pretty sad stuff—far more gamy than gay, and far richer in snickers than in laughs.

It's a pretty complicated yarn that Mr. Nugent has whipped up—a yarn about a lot of childless couples in a Connecticut town, and a pretty young lady who is visiting there and suddenly turns out to be pregnant. She won't say who the father is, but when old Jim Blair's not-so-old wife decides it is he, Jim doesn't deny it. In a trice he's the talk of the town—but more an object of admiration than of scandal. The childless wives crowd his door step, their husbands become jealous, and there is plenty of routine bedlam before matters are righted for everybody.

I'm afraid that a play like this would have to be terribly funny in order to be funny at all. The subject, no matter how playfully intended, is a handicap rather than a help; to avoid seeming distasteful, it would need a great deal more deftness and wit than Mr. Nugent has anywhere shown. Now and then he comes through with an amusing line; otherwise he just plays his one tarnished joke to death, or laboriously builds up new complications. No gem to start with, *That Old Devil* goes steadily from bad to worse.

Mr. Nugent is far more ingratiating as an actor than as a playwright; he plays Jim Blair for more, on the whole, than he is worth. Luella Gear and the others in the cast dutifully create the commotion demanded of them, but have little chance to shine.

NEW YORK SUN
June 6, 1944

J. C. Nugent Starred in "That Old Devil," Comedy by Himself, at Playhouse

By HERRICK BROWN

J. C. NUGENT, head of the famous stage clan, came ambling back to the Broadway scene last evening in a comedy of his own brewing, called "That Old Devil," which had its premiere at the Playhouse under the sponsorship of Lodewick Vroom. For his return the actor-playwright wrote a nice fat part for himself in Jim Blair, retired business man of Beechville, Conn., and the henpecked husband of a wife some years his junior. Unfortunately he apparently never got around to writing a good play to go with the part.

In his long years in the theatre Mr. Nugent is credited with having had a hand in the authorship in some previous seventeen plays. He and his talented son Elliott turned out a rousing hit some two decades back, in fact, in "Kempy," and their "The Poor Nut" still stands as one of the most amusing plays of college life.

When the elder Nugent went to work alone this time, he appears to have been satisfied to reach blindfolded down into the old bag of theatrical tricks, dig up the ancient theme of the middle-aged couples who want a baby to brighten their homes, draw out some stock small-town characters to figure in the complications, and haul out, too, some of the well-worn gags involving paternity.

To lend an up to the minute air to the affair he has tossed in an attractive English girl orphan who is really on the way to becoming a mother and a young 4-F who is striving manfully to get into the Army Air Corps. It is around the question of the identity of the father of the young woman's ex-

pected child that Mr. Nugent has built all the complications in his plot.

The audience knows almost from the start the answer to this situation and as a result the actors look pretty silly as they tell a string of lies over three acts and rush madly to and fro in mock ire. If any of the principals involved had told the truth during the first act and if henpecked Jim's wife had listened just a bit more carefully to what the doctor told her, the whole audience could have left early in the evening. Some of the members did anyway.

After taking a long opening act to get confusion reigning, Mr. Nugent manages to arouse some genuine hilarity for a time, as Jim basks in the glow of scandal when the accusing finger points straight at him. By the third act, however, the fun has worn thin again.

J. C. Nugent, the actor, strives valiantly to save the play of J. C. Nugent, the playwright, and succeeds in making the amiable and brow-beaten Jim a very amusing figure for at least part of the evening. There is a sameness to the role which grows tiresome before the final curtain, however. Given some good lines to speak, Luella Gear can be an excellent comedienne, but as Jim's domineering wife, she couldn't arouse much laughter last night. Agnes Doyle and Michael Ames bring a pleasing freshness to the roles of the girl from England and the would-be aviator. Most of the other routine parts permitted only the routine playing they got.

Doubling still further in brass, Actor Nugent served as his own director, but even as excellent a showman as he was never successful in pulling together the trite and rambling comedy Playwright Nugent tossed off.

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
June 6, 1944

Babies Again! "That Old Devil" Has 'Em —and J. C. Nugent, Too

By JOHN CHAPMAN

A NEW theatrical year having started this month, I suppose it is all right to begin all over again having comedies about girls who are pr-gn-nt. In J. C. Nugent's "That Old Devil," which appeared last night at the Playhouse, a girl is about to have a b-by, and before a pleasant little evening has ended Old Man Nugent himself is about to become a f-th-r.

Compared with several of the horrors which appeared last year, "That Old Devil" is a wow. It is not hilarious, but it is reasonably full of chuckles if anybody wants to sit around and chuckle of a Summer's eve. It is simple and thinly spread, and its chief value is the presence of its author, Nugent is stagewise. His style of comedy is casual but canny. He knows when to do a double-take and when not to; when to swagger and when to wilt; when to throw a line away and when to sell one.

Women Are Bored

In this Connecticut town he is telling about, the manpower shortage has got the women down. Since there is nobody around but their old, dull husbands, they spend their lives at cards and gabble. Dullest of the gents is Luella Gear's mate, the rotund, squint-eyed Nugent, in whom there is no sex appeal.

None that is, until a girl in the house gets herself into what playwrights consider an interesting condition, and for the purpose of getting the comedy going suspicion falls upon Nugent. He placidly takes the rap and instantly becomes the town wolf. Female bridge players who always looked right through him before come over and make passes at him.

With this new, fascinating power of his he has a fine time messing up some lives, straightening out others and even gaining a new respect from his dominant wife. As seems to be the rule in comedies about procreation, it turns out that everybody is innocent. The preg—the girl has a right to be that way, being in love and married, and Nugent's right to be an expectant bottle-warmer and diaper-changer in his own household is unquestioned.

Miss Gear Good Partner

All is told inoffensively and with good manners. Miss Gear, as the old devil's wife, is also stagewise, being an adept at ladylike mugging and an old hand at delivering catty lines. Ruth Gates, as one of the neighbors, has a funny seduction scene with Nugent. Ruth Gilbert plays a comedy maid quite pertly, and Agnes Doyle and Michael Ames are likeable as Boy and Girl.

The author directed. I fear that "That Old Devil" is not a smash hit, for customers have been inattentive to mild comedy of late. But it may serve to keep Mr. Nugent around for a few weeks and he is a very amiable actor.

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
June 6, 1944

J. C. Nugent Stars In 'That Old Devil'

By ROBERT GARLAND

EVERY time I opened my eyes last night at the Playhouse, nothing worth telling you about was going on. It's too bad! For Playwright J. C. Nugent has written an abortive comedy for Actor J. C. Nugent to act in. And Producer Lodewick Vroom has fetched it into 48th Street with Playwright-Actor J. C. Nugent as star. And that nice Luella Gear as featured player.

All three of them—playwright, star and featured player—might better have stood at home, listening to Franklin Delano Roosevelt on the radio. As a matter of report, the people at the Playhouse handled the situation unimaginatively. Mr. Roosevelt's talk, a singularly important one, was on the air from 8:30 until 8:45. Yet there was no loudspeaker in lobby or auditorium.

Now, after sitting all the way through Playwright-Actor Nugent's "That Old Devil," I can tell you that it wouldn't have made much difference if they'd called the whole thing off. As a playwright, Mr. Nugent has done well with "Kempy." As an actor, he has also done well with "Kempy." But he's let himself down on both counts where last night's mishap is concerned.

* * *

Kid Stuff

Even as an attempt to be funny, "That Old Devil" is too little and too late. When I tell you that Playwright-Actor Nugent has turned to the she's-going-to-have-a-baby school of composition, you'll be as surprised as you're disappointed. The merriment of motherhood, legitimate or otherwise, is neither as fresh nor as funny as it seemed when "Kiss and Tell" was new.

I think it's Lila Merrill who's in an uninteresting condition at the Playhouse, across the street from "Wallflower," a stone's-throw from "Three's A Family" and a block from where "Kiss and Tell" is playing. Anyway, every male body on the stage is given credit if it is credit, or blame, if blame's the word. But especially, Jim Blair, whose real name is J. C. Nugent.

These Blairs—Jim and his wife, Martha—live and have their friends in Beechville, Conn. You can take it from me, as well as from Mr. Nugent, that Beechville and its residents are a town and a townspeople to avoid. Idle, ill bred, stupid and sterile, they're most certainly not Americans with whom to spend an evening. Not even when they're make-believe, as at the Playhouse.

* * *

Muddle-Muddle

There's no small amount of mouth-and-foot-work while "That Old Devil" carries on. Nothing comes of it. The second-rate citizens of the—I hope!—imaginary village of Beechville talk and walk in and out of the Jim Blairs' living room. But their talk is tiresome, their activity unaffording. After an early evening full of what-goes-on-here, the actors no longer care.

As author, star and director, J. C. Nugent is at a loss to know exactly what to do. One of the most engaging and expert of comedians, his own lines and situations evade him time and time again, leaving him and his supporting players high and dry. Once in too great a while a real Nugentian line comes sparkling across the footlights. The rest is muddle-muddle!

Luella Gear, a charming and clever comedienne when given opportunity, clowns wholeheartedly with odds against her. The others are run-of-the-script performers, with the Hester who is Ruth Gilbert giving out like a radio. Michael Ames, late of "Mrs. Kimball Presents" and "Public Relations," is back again in "That Old Devil." Change "Devil" to "Bore," and you've got something.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
June 6, 1944

That Old Devil Fails to Stand Up as Farce

By BURTON RASCOE

IN That Old Devil, which opened at the Playhouse last night, J. C. Nugent, the star and the author, has written for himself a part which is commensurate with his own generous proportions. And, as long as he stands still and says nothing, he is natural, cherubic, amusing and appealing. Unfortunately he has lines to say and certain stage "business" to engage in. These are neither amusing nor appealing. In fact they are, from time to time, distinctly offensive.

The whole idea, I think, is unfortunate in the way it is worked out. The idea itself, while pretty badly shopworn, has inherent farcical possibilities. It is about the domestic worm that turns, the henpecked cypher in the home, whom no woman in the village ever notices, who contrives to get a reputation as a rip with the women, playing the field with no favorites and no holds barred.

But once Mr. Nugent, as Jim Blair, has inadvertently aroused his wife's interest in him to the point of jealousy, he doesn't follow up his advantage with taste and imagination. On the contrary, he slips off the deep-end into unpleasant innuendo and into actions that are reprehensible even if they are intended only as a joke. For there is nothing funny about even the simulated lecherous advances of an elderly man toward two girls, one 14 and the other 18, or about his intimations that he has bought intimacy with a still younger girl for a dollar.

Good Taste Offended

Nor, as I see it, is Mr. Nugent either chivalrous or correct, but libelous, rather, toward the middle-aged married women of Connecticut villages when he implies (as he does throughout the second act) that their moral scruples are so slight and their amorous glow so great that, once they suspect a husband among them is a philanderer, they besiege him with eyes agleam, hoping he will sin with them also.

To me, last night, it was no mitigation of Mr. Nugent's offenses against good taste to know right from the first, that Jim Blair was innocent of any wrongdoing and that his little deceptions had in them, first, a wistful and pathetic desire to have his young wife (Luella Gear) pay him some attention, and, later on, a magnanimous impulse to shield a young English refugee waif from the catty, scandal-mongering hens of the village in which he lived as a retired financier.

For none of this was believable, anyhow, so false were the situations Mr. Nugent had created in his script, so inept were the cari-

catures he had drawn to represent people. Although they dashed in and out a great deal, often for no reason more apparent than that of creating the illusion of action, the other characters (including Miss Gear) were as static as if they were outlined in pen and ink and their speeches spelled out in "balloons."

The Plot

The story of That Old Devil, in brief, is this: Jim Blair is vaguely unhappy because his wife never pays any attention to him, except to nag him, and he is beginning to wonder whether he didn't make a mistake in marrying a woman younger than himself, when an English girl who had been "adopted" by a neighbor is wished on him (to his wife's dismay) by the neighbor whose wife has become jealous of her husband's attentions to the girl. The girl is secretly in love with a protege of Blair's, a young radical (Michael Ames), who is being sought by the police for rotten-egging the town's leading patrioteer, and who is 4F for reason of color-blindness but has prospects of getting into the camouflage service, where color-blindness, it seems, is an asset. When the girl gets an urgent message from the boy to meet him at a drugstore, both Blair and his wife mistake her actions for symptoms of pregnancy, and Blair seizes the opportunity to arouse his wife's jealousy by implying that he is the father of the child.

Two acts are employed to develop and straighten out this complication. The audience (rightly so, I think) was not very responsive to this type of humor. The direction was so faulty that even actors as talented and as attractive as are Miss Gear, Mr. Ames and Agnes Doyle, often seemed to be stymied by an inner conviction that what they were doing and saying was not the right way to do or say it—or the thing to say or do.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
June 6, 1944

The Devil Fails Us

By HOWARD BARNES

THE veteran J. C. Nugent has not served himself well in "That Old Devil." To be sure, he has written himself a whopping central role in the new Playhouse offering. He has staged the action of his comedy so that it always converges on his portrayal of a gallant old gent, who masquerades as a philanderer to protect a couple of nice youngsters. Unfortunately, he has failed to write gayly or felicitously, and all his acting tricks do little to save a late season mishap.

• • •

Most of the play is devoted to a supposedly antic contemplation of elderly romantic complications. Staid burghers of a small town in Connecticut become embroiled when an ancient admits that he is to be the father of a young English refugee's unborn child. The codger's wife leaves him; other matrons suddenly find him glamorous and their husbands commence shouting wolf. Since he is only stalling for time, until the British miss can marry the lad she really wants as father of her child, everything is quite proper in the production. It is rarely amusing and generally downright boring.

• • •

Nugent has surrounded himself with knowing performers in his whimsy, but they are even less successful than he in giving a windy script a chance to take off with a bit of merriment. There is a scene in the second act in which the unwilling old devil makes passes at a friend's wife which are faintly funny. On the whole the company is left standing around delivering sorry lines and posturing in absurd plot groupings. As a matter of fact, the author and star tagged one scene last evening with the remark: "Where am I supposed to be?"

• • •

While he wanders benevolently and a bit leeringly through the proceedings, the others are left holding an extremely empty bag of make-believe. Luella Gear contributes some sharp accents of satire to the piece, which it certainly does not deserve. Matt Briggs plays an unctuous hypocrite with a blustering exaggeration which merely underlines the lack of full-bodied character-drawing and Agnes Doyle, Ruth Gates and Michael Ames add conventional bits to a conventional farce. The setting by Paul Morrison is about the best thing in "That Old Devil," which should give you a good idea of the drama's worth.

"A Strange Play"
"According to Law"

"A Strange Play," comedy by Patti Spears; "According to Law," drama by Noel Houston; staged by Eugene Endrey; settings by Harry Bennett. Presented by Mr. Endrey at the Mansfield Theater, June 1, 1944.

NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM
June 2, 1944

Season Opens By Mistake

By LOUIS KRONENBERGER

EUGENE ENDREY opened the 1944-45 season Thursday night in somewhat startling fashion. That he opened it with a double bill is no more, to be sure, than a little unusual. But there was something genuinely bizarre about the wild contrast in mood between the grisly curtain-raiser, *According to Law*, and the devilishly tony and sophisticated work known as *A Strange Play*. Finally, there was something truly mystifying as to why *A Strange Play* was ever garlanded with a production. It's only the season's first play, but it will take a lot of luck for anything else to be the season's worst one.

Let me speak first, however, of what came first, Noel Huston's one-acter, *According to Law*, deals with the "trial" of a Negro accused of trying to rape a rich society woman. The whole thing is a piece of legal lynching; the Negro's obvious innocence and his down-and-out drunken lawyer's keen probing are simply no match for a corrupt judge and a viciously prejudiced jury. Mr. Houston has hit out fiercely in a good cause, but unfortunately most of his satire is as crude as it is harsh. *According to Law* holds one's interest, but for its subject-matter rather than its treatment. Don Appell gave a pretty good performance as the lawyer.

• • •

From this grim tale to the Long Island imbecilities of *A Strange Play* is quite a jump. Patti Spears, who, according to the program, "is better known as a lyric soprano, has whipped up a fashionable triangle story, and tossed in a playwright to exploit the situation for his work-in-progress. The work-in-progress goes through quite a few versions—letting the husband know, not letting him know, half letting him know—all of which are dutifully acted out in great detail. Search me which version the playwright finally decided to use. All I know is that *A Strange Play* makes hardly a grain of sense and is couched in rather astonishing language. The surgeon husband, called out on a case, apologizes to his guests with, "You understand, I'm sure—the oath of Hippocrates." And the lover rather breaks the spell of a passionate scene by saying to the wife, "How can you forget Atlantic City?"

The acting is even worse, if that's possible, than the writing.

THE CAST

'A STRANGE PLAY'

Dr. Stephen Duryea	Richard Gordon
Claire	Alicia Parnahay
Paul Cartwright	Herbert Heyes
William Douglas	Ralph Clanton
James	Byron Russell

'ACCORDING TO LAW'

Jim Nailey	Gregory Robins
Henry Terry	Robert Harrison
Henry Yancey	Winsor Bryan
Luke	Burton Mallory
Senator Lawrence	Dayton Lummis
Charlie Teague	Wardell Saunders
George Randall	Henry Wilson
Ben Staggs	Don Appell
Mrs. Harkness	Lorraine MacMartin
Harvey	Harvey Marlowe

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
June 2, 1944

'According to Law' a Good Act; 'A Strange Play' Simply Terrible

By JOHN CHAPMAN

NOT being in the business of psychoanalysis, I can't attempt to fathom a managerial mind which could—and did, by golly, last night at the Mansfield—believe that both "According to Law" and "A Strange Play" were worth producing.

The first-mentioned offering, a one-acter, is good—a vivid and cynical report on the trial of a negro for raping a white woman down South. The second is simply godawful. The program says it is a two-acter, but it was a one-acter for me . . . and don't anybody ever try to tell me how it came out.

"According to Law," by Noel Houston, won a prize in a play-writing contest conducted by the American Civil Liberties Union in 1939. It has little plot and no hopeful conclusion. It simply tells of a "nigger" before a court of justice on the capital charge of assault.

"Southern Justice"

The prisoner has been shot several times by a posse and is in a wheel chair. The judge

is a vote-sucking old slob. The jury is impaneled from bums hanging around the courthouse. The white woman is a tomato whose husband came home too early one night and found a man there, so her easiest out is to holler rape. The prosecutor is a villain, the deputy sheriffs are lugs and the attorney for the defense is a town drunk who is awakened from a sound stupor and presented with the case.

This little lawyer with a hangover has impudence enough to put up a good fight. His pleas for justice and fair consideration of evidence are sound—but, of course, useless. The jobless louts on the jury turn in a guilty verdict without leaving the box, and the lawyer goes out to collect his $25 fee so he can buy some more gin and see the circus.

"According to Law" is, you have gathered, an angry and bitter little play. It takes a side and argues for it with vigor. It is not badly directed by its producer, Eugene Endrey.

Then this Eugene Endrey turns around and produces and directs "A Strange Play," by Patti Spears. This is supposed to be a sophisticated comedy, but if it is, Lincoln Beachey flew a Flying Fortress. A surgeon, his wife, a playwright, an actor and a butler gather in the good old Long Island living room and begin to give off with the silliest dialogue of the season. The acting is terrible and I won't bother you with the half of the plot I heard.

NEW YORK TIMES
June 2, 1944

Zowie!

By LEWIS NICHOLS

DUE to the technicality that it was June 1, a new Broadway season opened last evening. Obviously the theatre was mad about something. Reaching down into the pot, it flung a handful of dregs called "A Strange Play" at an audience which hadn't meant any harm going to the Mansfield. Perhaps the theatre thought it still was the season of 1943-44—or even 1843; who knows? At all events, Patti Spears has turned out something about a playwright—who says he is "a waterfall gone dry"—a surgeon, his wife, a lover and a butler.

It is to the author's credit that the first part of the play is wonderful in an inverse fashion. "Praise the Lord and pass the cognac," says someone over the brandy. "How can you forget Atlantic City?" says the lover to the wife when she looks as though she might be forgetting Atlantic City. "That night, darling," says the wife to the surgeon about the same trip to Atlantic City, for she was a pretty busy girl that night, "that night you were only sixteen." Unfortunately, however, "A Strange Play" not always is funny, in an inverse fashion, and by the time the actors have repeated it once or twice, it grows tiresome. The acting is bad, too.

As a curtain raiser to the main attraction, Eugene Endrey has revived Noel Houston's "According to Law." This is a one acter done some years ago at the Provincetown Playhouse and well received at that time. It is in bad company, and is a thousand or so per cent better than its little friend. The new season has opened. First batter, out.

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
June 2, 1944

Strange Indeed

By OTIS L. GUERNSEY JR.

LAST night's offering at the Mansfield, bravely entitled "A Strange Play," turned out to be one of the season's most floundering productions. Its basis is a husband-wife-lover triangle of the most obvious sort, a dreary domestic situation that is enacted three different ways for one of the characters who writes plays and wants to get an idea out of the mess. It is supposed to be a drawing-room comedy-drama, with characters that walk about drinking dry champagne with one hand placed jauntily in the side pocket of a tuxedo jacket. But the dialogue is so incredibly naive and over-written that the actors appear to have wandered in by mistake, doggedly attempting to make up a play as they go along.

• • •

The original situation is dumped on the stage like a load of bricks, without any evidence of dramatic force or intuition. A young actor kisses an elderly host's young wife, and for two acts another guest, who witnessed the innocuous scene, can't make up his mind whether or not to tell the husband. For the two acts of the play's duration the author, Patti Spears, has loaded the fragile situation with such a fantastic burden of lush adjectives and fatuous philosophy that the play sinks under its own weight of words. The actors seem content merely to speak their lines without seeming silly, and they aren't uniformly successful in this attempt. The acting of the evening was remarkable only for one very bad performance, but the performers were hardly to blame; "A strange Play" just wasn't worth the effort.

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The one-act drama "According to Law" was the curtain-raiser on the Mansfield's program. As its title implies, it takes place in a courtroom, where a Negro is on trial for his life. The play is set in a Southern state where such a defendant is likely to, and does, get short shrift. A biased judge appoints a drunken, though high-minded, young lawyer to defend him, and it is through the intervention of this latter character that the action becomes social drama of the most outspoken sort.

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This one-acter by Noel Houston, rises to occasional heights of eloquence, especially when the defending lawyer is pleading his losing case to the jury, but a good many of the play's ideas have been worn to the bone in other previous works. At any rate, there is a brilliant performance by Don Appell as the defending lawyer; and any attempt to present a one-act play on Broadway is to be applauded, since there is no regular outlet for this particular dramatic form. Unfortunately it will have to share its fate with that of its running-mate.

NEW YORK POST
June 2, 1944

'A Strange Play' Is Indeed Peculiar; 'According to Law' Still Effective

By WILELLA WALDORF

SOMETHING very fancy in the infidelity line went on at the Mansfield Theatre last night in the course of a two-act ineptitude entitled "A Strange Play." The young wife of an elderly and doting surgeon was carrying on with a handsome actor when the surgeon's best friend caught on. The best friend was a playwright so of course he kept trying to make a play out of the situation.

Should a man's best friend tell or should he keep quiet about it? The playwright occupied a spotlight, with pad and pencil, and tried out one idea, then another. This made it necessary to keep starting all over again, with the result that some of the dialogue had to be listened to not once but several times.

The dialogue was the sort nobody wanted to listen to even once. It consisted of such ejaculations as "Darling, how can you forget Atlantic City?" and "No, No! A thousand times No!" interspersed with inane philosophizing, bursts of Beethoven and Chopin from an off-stage piano, toasts in champagne and much telephoning by a butler who lifted the receiver and inquired Britishly, "Are you there?"

The efforts of the actors to make it all sound smart and sophisticated were almost as comical as the dialogue, with the result that it wasn't long before the audience was roaring so loud that much of the chatter was actually lost in the hubbub.

Since the theatre was extremely warm, what remained of the first-night audience after the lucky ones had hastened from the scene was completely wilted with laughter and perspiration.

A Curtain-Raiser

The only sensible portion of the evening's dramatic fare was the curtain-raiser, Noel Houston's one-act courtroom play, "According to Law," originally acted down at the Provincetown Playhouse about four years ago.

Mr. Houston's drama is a bitter, ironic indictment of a Southern community which prides itself on handling the Negro problem "according to law." Instead of stringing up colored boys accused of rape, the County court sees to it they are legally lynched. The whole procedure is a mockery of courts and justice.

Mr. Houston's play is stinging stuff, as it was four years ago, and the leading role, that of the boozing down-and-out lawyer who earns $25 every now and then defending a colored boy, though he knows there isn't any use, is again acted effectively by Don Appell.

A one-act play, however, hardly adds up to a full evening in the theatre. The rest was a total loss except for a few laughs at, not with, "A Strange Play."

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
June 2, 1944

'A Strange Play' At the Mansfield

By ROBERT GARLAND

EUGENE ENDREY (whoever he is) produced Patti Spears' (whoever she is) "A Strange Play" (whatever that is) last night at the Mansfield Theatre. (I know about the Mansfield.) And all I can say is that if "A Strange Play" had been exposed on the 1st of September, 1943, instead of on the 1st of June, 1944, it still would have closed the season of 1943-1944 as far as I'm concerned. Falling back on a mellow and meandering memory, it's the worst play I ever saw.

In two acts and one setting, "A Strange Play" shouldn't happen to the Nora Bayes. Or even to the Provincetown! I'm sorry I wasted the phrase "must be seen to be depreciated" on "Next to Broadway," "Hairpin Harmony" or some such comparative masterpiece. Here and now is where that phrase belongs. Even when you're sitting in the presence of last night's theatrical misdemeanor, you just don't believe your ears and eyes.

There ain't no such playwriting. There ain't no such playacting. Seeing's not believing. Nor is hearing. Such wit! "Praise the Lord and pass the cognac," for instance. Such conversation! "No, no, a hundred times no," for example. Such originality! A Wife, a Husband and a Lover, for goodness' sake. A Butler, frightened at an early age by Noel (Noelly) Coward. A Dramatist, scared out of his plots by Somerset (Willie) Maugham . . . A strange play, indeed!

Write He Must

Patti Spears certainly said it in her title, although "A Playwright in Search of a Story" would have explained her story better. For it seems that Paul Cartwright, stranded for the weekend in the Stephen Duryea's Long Island drawing room, can't think of anything

to write about. And write he must! His producer (Heaven help him) simply has to have a new play (Heaven help it) to follow the knockouts playwriting Paul already has written.

What does the bounder do? An inspiration! He'll write about what's going on beneath his very nose. He'll make his first act out of Claire Duryea, the Wife; Dr. Stephen Duryea, the Husband, and William Douglas, the Lover. He'll make his second act out of what would have happened if the Husband's Best Friend (the visiting playwright) had told The Husband what was going on. He'll make his third act out of what would have happened if the Husband's Best Friend had done no such thing.

There you have it. There you can keep it for your very own. And the characters of your lush Long Island love story are straight out of Lucius Beebe's column. And the actors, aware of their responsibility, act up to it. So uppity do they act that you feel you're intruding . . . Owing to the nature of her narrative, Patti Spears tells and retells her triangular tale three times each evening at the Mansfield. Once, I am sure, would have been too many.

* * *

Curtain-Raiser

While "According to Law," last night's curtain-raiser, is a good deal more worthy than "A Strange Play," the curtain-lowerer, it's pretty much of a run-of-the-mill propaganda play. Produced for the first time on Manhattan four years ago at the Provincetown Playhouse hard by Washington Square, Noel Houston's preachment is the familiar one on racial injustice in the Deep South. As a matter of fact, it once won a prize in the bedeviling Dixie series.

Charlie Teague, a young Negro, is accused of raping Mrs. Harkness, an older white woman. Pushed into court in a wheel chair, Charlie, of course, says "No." But, also of course, the Judge, the Jury, the Sheriff and everybody else, including Mrs. Harkness, who's no better than she should be, says "Yes." Why shouldn't they? They're southern, they're white, they're in a propaganda play. They're also remarkably well acted by the players at the Mansfield.

Don Appell is (if I may use the word) superb as Ben Staggs, the alcoholic attorney who defends Charlie Teague, the automatically convicted colored boy. It is Mr. Appell who dealt with the role downtown; it is Mr. Appell who directed "Career Angel" uptown. He is a young man of 27 who'll make his mark in the theatre . . . The best thing that can be said about the double bill at the Mansfield is that it brings the ancient and honorable custom of the curtain-raiser back to Broadway.

NEW YORK SUN
June 2, 1944

'A Strange Play,' Presented With One-acter, 'According to Law,' at Mansfield

By HERRICK BROWN

THE Broadway theater seldom offers quite the strange evening it did last night, as a two-act comedy, by Miss Patti Spears, most aptly named "A Strange Play," came into the Mansfield Theater as the longer work in a mercifully brief double bill.

A program note explains that Miss Spears is better known as a lyric soprano than a playwright. "A Strange Play" will hardly serve to change her status. Her offering involves one of those plots where a dramatist attempts to concoct a play before the eyes of the audience. In this case the harried writer for the stage is portrayed striving to save the marriage of his old friend, a surgeon. Stumbling in on the physician's youthful wife in the arms of a popular young actor, he promptly falls asleep and dreams several solutions to the dilemma. The result at the Mansfield last night was a nightmare of silly dialogue and sillier situations, and the acting in "A Strange Play" was no better than the play itself. The surgeon sums everything up beautifully, as he keeps rushing back from saving the life of an injured child to announce, not once, but several times, "It was a very pathetic case."

As a one-act curtain-raiser, Eugene Endrey, the sponsor of the evening's proceedings, offers "According to Law," a courtroom drama which, in 1939, won a nationwide contest sponsored by the American Civil Liberties Union, and which Greenwich Village has seen previously at the Provincetown Playhouse. It's a turgid bit about the trial of a Negro for rape and stacks the dramatic cards as heavily in favor of its hero as justice is stacked against him in the plot. Don Appell contributed a few effective moments as a rumpot lawyer acting for the defense and Wardell Saunders acted realistically frightened as the prisoner. Most of the rest of the playing was stock-company acting at its very worst.

The one completely enjoyable thing about the evening was that the audience was dismissed at 10:30 promptly.

NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
June 2, 1944

Double Bill Presented But Fails to Register

By BURTON RASCOE

A STRANGE PLAY (strange is hardly the word for it!), a short two-acter by Patti Spears, and According to Law, a one-acter by Noel Houston, which won the Civil Liberties Union prize in 1939, were presented for the price of one at the Mansfield last night. A double bill is common enough in opera and is not exactly rare in the regular theater, the most recent being, I believe, Eddie Dowling's presentation of Chesterton's Magic in combination with Saroyan's Hello Out There!

The offering last night, however, hadn't even the virtue of the block-billing system of the movies, which prompted one West Coast exhibitor plangently and effectively to advertise: "As Usual: One Good Picture and One Stinkeroo." According to Law is an earnestly and honestly written little essay in defeatism (though the intended effect was that of tragic irony), but Erskine Caldwell, Waldo Frank, T. S. Stribling and dozens of others have worked the theme to death in short stories and novels, and, except for a very good job by Don Appell, this play, designed to show that a Negro, falsely accused of rape, cannot get justice in certain Southern courts, was very badly acted.

A Strange Play was in even a worse case. Two minutes after the curtain went up on an utterly ridiculous scene ostensibly representing the drawing room of the Long Island country home of a fashionable doctor, people in the audience began to laugh at the incredibly amateurish dialogue and the even more incredibly amateurish acting of Alicia Parnahay and Ralph Clanton and, as the preposterous concoction proceeded, the hilarity became so general that it was a wonder the curtain wasn't rung down.

Many Didn't Return

People began to walk out in the middle of the first act and about a third of the audience failed to return after the intermission. But there were some of us who were so fascinated by the believe-it-or-not aspect of the thing that we came back rather expecting the evening to turn into a riot of laughter. Unfortunately, the second act didn't hold up. The author obviously ran out of banalities and it all dwindled into a somewhat pathetic exhibition of ineptitude.

You won't believe it, unless you see it yourself, what people tell you about A Strange Play; you'll think they are kidding. There is not one line, one sentence, in it that bears any relation to the way people talk. It is all "literary" in the very worst sense—the literature of the two-bit romantic trash of 40 years ago. At one point the faithless wife says, "No! A thousand times no!" Very soon thereafter the deceived husband says, "No! A million times no!" I waited for the philanderer to say, "No! A billion times no!" and for somebody else to raise the ante to a trillion times no, and for the game to go on from there the way one kid will say, "I'll bet you a trillion billion dollars," and another will say, "I'll bet you a million trillion billion," until they get up to a hundred dozen trillion million, but the play is as full of disappointments as it is of incredible surprises.

Acting Bad

And the acting! Here's one play where the critics can't blame the whole thing on the author and condole with the players for having to struggle with such material. The acting is genuinely bad; the voices are loud and unnatural; the gestures awkward when not downright laughable; the movements about the stage so false and amateurish that you'd think high school children doing a charade would have more stage sense than was displayed last evening.

According to Law is about a woman who, caught by her husband, in flagrante delicto with a white lover, accuses a Negro of raping her. The Negro is put through the farce of a trial, the outcome of which is foreseen by the drunken lawyer appointed to defend him. A Strange Play is about a playwright who, as a week end guest at his best friend's house, gets an idea for a play when he catches another guest, an actor, and his friend's wife in a passionate embrace. His "problem" ethically, and for playwriting purposes, is whether to tell the husband. It is the nadir of dramatic offerings of recent years.

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